DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 468 335 EA 031 887

AUTHOR	Glass, Thomas E.
TITLE	Superintendent Leaders Look at the Superintendency, School Boards and Reform. ECS Issue Paper: Leadership.
INSTITUTION	Education Commission of the States, Denver, CO.
PUB DATE	2001-07-00
NOTE	6p.
AVAILABLE FROM	Education Commission of the States, 700 Broadway, Suite 1200, Denver CO 80203-3460. Tel: 303-299-3600; Fax: 303-296-8332; Web site: http://www.ecs.org. For full text: www.ecs.org/clearinghouse/ 27/18/2718.htm.
PUB TYPE	Information Analyses (070) -- Reports - Evaluative (142)
EDRS PRICE	EDRS Price MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Administrative Policy; *Administrators; *Boards of Education; *Educational Change; Elementary Secondary Education; *Leadership; Policy Analysis; *School Administration; *Superintendents
IDENTIFIERS	Reform Efforts; State Policy; State Role

ABSTRACT

This issue paper is the first in a series commissioned by the Education Commission of the States on issues relating to superintendent and school-board leadership. The study from which this paper derives builds on earlier studies that focused on characteristics and demographics of the superintendency, and on the status of relations and functions of school boards and superintendents. This paper reviews those earlier studies and focuses on the results of a survey of 175 superintendents judged nationally by their peers to be outstanding. The key finding is that most superintendents (71 percent) agreed that the superintendency is in a state of crisis. This and other findings suggest the following considerations for policymakers: (1) Research is needed to determine what actions superintendents would take to restructure school-board governance; (2) policymakers need to consider means to develop portable, interstate pension and retirement plans; (3) states need to ensure adequate levels of funding; (4) policymakers should explore ways to retain superintendents; (5) research is needed to understand why there are so few women and minorities in the superintendent applicant pool; (6) research is needed to ascertain the political preferences of superintendents and school-board members; and (7) policymakers should investigate ways to decrease turnover in school boards. (WFA)

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Education Commission of the States

ECS Issue Paper

Leadership

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The University of Memphis

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Superintendent Leaders Look at the Superintendency, School Boards and Reform

Thomas E. Glass

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July 2001

The Education Commission of the States (ECS) has commissioned Thomas E. Glass to design and conduct a series of leadership issue papers to gather information on issues relating to superintendent and school board leadership. These national studies build on a decade of work conducted by the American Association of School Administrators (AASA) and focus not only on characteristics and demographics of the superintendency, but also on the status of school board/superintendent relations and functions. First, the exact problems need to be identified through data collection, then, solutions need to be articulated. Following is the first commissioned paper. For more information, contact Katy Anthes, policy analyst, Education Commission of the States, 303-299-3635.

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Overview and Findings

After years of highly publicized reform efforts, school reformers are beginning to take notice that superintendents and school boards are important participants in improving school performance. Unfortunately, there is little data-based research on the role of the superintendency and the nearly 14,000 men and women who provide day-to-day executive leadership for nearly 90,000 schools. There also is virtually no current national demographic or opinion data on school boards and school board members and what role they play in district leadership.

This study is the last of four recent national studies concerning superintendents. The first, *Career Crisis in the School Superintendency* by Bruce Cooper, Lance Fusarelli and Vincent Carella, found that a sample of 1,719 superintendents perceived the superintendency to be in serious crisis. A second study, *The Study of the American School Superintendency 2000: A Look at the Superintendent in the New Millennium* by Thomas Glass, Lars Bjork and Cryss Brunner, reports troubling conditions besetting the superintendency. Such troubling conditions include a large number of insignificant, yet time consuming, demands placed on the superintendent's time, a third of board members not being well-qualified and problems with finding adequate fiscal and human resources. The third study, *The Invisible CEO* completed in 1999 by Harold Hodgkinson and Xenia Montenegro, highlighted the serious problem in lack of equity in race and gender among superintendents.

This fourth study, *Superintendent Leaders Look at the Superintendency, School Boards and Reform*, provides an entry-level view of superintendents and their work based on the results of a survey of 175 superintendents judged nationally by their peers to be outstanding. Recognized as leading members of their profession, the views of these "superintendent leaders" are surveyed in an attempt to: (1) compare differences in characteristics between the superintendent leader and national superintendent groups and (2) identify the views of superintendent leaders on key issues currently affecting the superintendency and

EA 031 887

education policy. The superintendent leader population for this study consisted of 267 superintendents designated Outstanding Superintendents between 1995 and 2000. A questionnaire containing 59 items was mailed to group members, and 175 completed instruments were returned for a return rate of 65.5%.

Fifty of the 59 survey items appeared on the 2000 AASA Ten-Year Study, *The Study of the American School Superintendency 2000: A Look at the Superintendent in the New Millennium.* These "decade" studies of the superintendency have been conducted by AASA since 1923. A number of the questionnaire items appear on previous Ten-Year Studies conducted in 1980 and 1990. Items from AASA's Ten-Year studies were included to make cross comparisons with the national group of superintendents. Use of questionnaire items on the survey from the 2000 Ten-Year Study provide an opportunity to compare the superintendent leader group against a national sample of 2,262 randomly selected superintendents.

According to the survey results, the superintendent leader group is comprised mostly of white males (95% white, 84% male) between 46 and 60 years of age (80%) who have been superintendents for more than 12 years (67%) and have served their present district for more than six years (71.2%). The majority of the superintendent leader group (62.7%) is located in districts between 3,000 to 25,000 students (compared with 25% of the national group). This size is typical for suburban districts adjacent to large cities. These districts are typically white, middle class, stable and better funded than urban or rural districts.

Superintendent leaders reported the following key information:

- Seventy-seven percent are optimistic about the future of public education, however, 71% agree that the superintendency is in a state of crisis. The leading reasons for the crisis according to superintendent leaders are: (1) school board/relations; (2) long work hours; and (3) stressful working conditions discouraging principals and central office administrators from seeking superintendencies.
- Ninety-three percent have a collaborative relationship with the school board and 88% feel their board is effective.Only 30% of superintendent leaders believe the current model for school board governance should continue in its current form. Instead, 52% responded that the governance structure needs to be seriously restructured, and 16% responded that the current governance system needs to be completely replaced.
- Inadequate financing is less a problem for superintendent leaders (25.6%) than for the national superintendents (44.2%). When asked about the most important change needed to improve their districts, the largest number of superintendent leader responses indicated funding was the most important problem to address, followed by the need to attract better, more qualified teachers.
- A high number (37%) of both superintendent leaders and superintendents from the national group report that having too many insignificant, yet time-consuming demands placed on their time is limiting their effectiveness as superintendents.
- About a third (35.1%) of the superintendent leaders say they would be more aggressive in pursuing school reform initiatives if given six-year contracts.
- Fifty-five percent believe that state accountability and testing have a positive effect in their district.

Superintendent leader survey responses differed from the national group in the following categories:

- Fifty-two percent had more than 14 years experience as a superintendent (compared with 24% from the national group).
- The superintendent leaders average nearly nine years in their present district. Half of the national superintendents leave their districts in less than six years.
- Eighty-four percent were evaluated by their board as excellent (compared with 69% from the national group).
- Eighty-three percent find considerable fulfillment in the superintendency (compared with approximately 57% of the national group).
- Superintendent leaders see themselves as much more politically moderate than their national counterparts who tend to be more conservative.

- Fifty-eight percent spend four or more hours per week in direct communication with their school board (compared with approximately 38% of the national group).
- Eighty-two percent would choose the superintendency again as a career choice (compared with approximately 66% of the national group).
- Seventy-one percent possess a Ph.D. or Ed.D. (compared with 45% of the national group).

Areas of similarity between the superintendent leader group and the national group:

- Both groups believe the superintendency is in a state of crisis.
- Most (79.9%) superintendent leaders remain in one state for their entire career. Only 13.8% crossed state lines to another superintendency. An even higher percentage (87.3%) of the AASA national group remained in one state.
- The majority of superintendents in both groups work under two- or three-year contracts. Such contracts can usually be terminated at the will of the board.
- Despite harsh criticism of how higher education programs prepare administrators, superintendent leaders (68.4%) view their personal preparation program as excellent or good. The same is true for the national sample of superintendents (69.4%).
- About 29% of superintendent leaders feel they were hired because of their abilities to be an instructional leader. The same was true for the national group. More than 60% of both groups, however, believe they were hired based on personal characteristics and the ability to be a change agent.
- Ninety-five percent of both superintendent leaders and the national group are white.
- Eighty-four percent of superintendent leaders are male, 87% of the national group are male.

Policy Questions To Consider

The study provides several interesting findings on how superintendent leaders currently view their profession. Of great note is the fact that more than 71% agree that the superintendency is in a state of crisis in which fewer quality applicants are available for positions fraught with stress, inadequate resources and public demands for higher academic accountability. The survey findings suggest a series of policy questions which should be considered.

1. Superintendent leaders are clearly displeased with the current board governance model. A large majority, however, also believe their boards are working effectively. **Further research is needed to ascertain what actions superintendents think are needed to best restructure school board governance. A national study of the present local school board governance model also should be undertaken.** No one "best" model may exist, but state legislation based on data analysis, rather than politics, might be able to create more effective boards, especially for those districts challenged by low achievement, conflict, poverty and community instability. Addressing board governance issues may also help to reduce the large number of insignificant, yet time-consuming, demands which many superintendents believe they are subjected to unnecessarily. Some of these demands might be a result of board micro-management.
2. The vast majority of superintendents remain in one state for their entire career. A major reason for this is a lack of pension plan portability. The lack of portability between state retirement systems handicaps states with fewer school districts from attracting strong applicant pools containing out-of-state superintendents, assistant superintendents and principals. **Policymakers need to consider taking steps to develop portable, interstate pension and retirement plans.**
3. Inadequate funding is identified by superintendent leaders as a top priority despite the fact that they are often located in larger, more affluent districts. **States need to engage in research studies to "find" levels of "adequacy of funding" sufficient for districts to meet present state education standards.**
4. Superintendent turnover is a serious problem in the nation's large urban districts where superintendents often rotate on a frequent basis (2.3 years). Superintendent leaders and the national

superintendent group, however, also indicate that longer and more secure tenure for superintendents might result in fuller implementation of programs focused on increasing academic achievement. Superintendent leaders and the national group indicate a chief expectation held by boards is to improve instructional programs and that such efforts take at least three to five years. **Policymakers should explore the feasibility of promoting six-year renewable superintendent contracts as a possible remedy to solve problems in brief superintendent tenure and district leadership stability.**

5. One important aspect of the current "crisis" in the superintendency is the underrepresentation of women and minorities. Such underrepresentation weakens the potential depth and breadth of the superintendent applicant pool. **Further research is needed to understand the root causes for gender and racial underrepresentation in the nation's schools.**

6. Superintendent leaders see themselves as more politically moderate than their national counterparts, who tend to be more conservative. Differing political philosophies might interfere with harmonious working relationships between boards and superintendents. Unfortunately, no data exists to compare the political preferences of superintendents and board members. **Further research is needed to ascertain the average differences in political preference between superintendents and school board members.**

7. The majority of superintendents believe they were hired based on their personal characteristics and ability to be an agent of change. Board turnover, however, increasingly results in changing board expectations for the superintendent every two years. **Policymakers should explore developing means to promote school board stability in order to help promote stability in the superintendency.**

Thomas Glass is professor of Educational Leadership at the University of Memphis. He is the lead author of "The Study of the American School Superintendency 2000: The Superintendent in the New Millennium" and sole author of "The American School Superintendency 1992, America's Education Leaders in a Time of Change." Both of these national studies were published by the American Association of School Administrators. He is a former superintendent of schools and former faculty member at Washington State University, Northern Illinois University and the University of Detroit.

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